

A visit with Tom Coughlin

BY DAVID A. MITTELL, JR.

Around town one often sees an always well-dressed, stillhandsome 80-year-old fellow who drives a dent-free, dingfree, cream-colored Bentley. Except at the Winsor House, where he frequently drops in, people may recognize the profile without having any idea of who he is. It is Tom Coughlin of James Road, who has lived a life unlike that of anyone else in Duxbury. He is a native of New York City, the son and brother of career police officers. Through the seventh grade he attended Immaculate Conception School in Jamaica, Queens. He says his parents sent him to Catholic schools not for the religion, but for the discipline. In the ninth grade, he entered LaSalle Academy on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. This school was founded in 1844 by Irish Christian Brothers to educate the sons of working immigrants. All the students were boys, the teachers men. (LaSalle Academy recently merged with a Ukrainian Catholic school on East Seventh Street, but is very much alive).



Tom Coughlin of Coughlin & Coughlin is a 46-year resident of Duxbury. Seeing Africa in 1959 would change the course of his life.

Tom graduated from the Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, Long Island, in 1957, then entered the Navy as an ensign. His naval duty was cut short when President Eisenhower sent troops into Lebanon in 1957, making the merchant marine short of personnel to supply the forces.

Tom's Winsor House acquaintances will attest that he is gregarious. He is also a man whose good word is the foundation of all his personal and business relations. Probably because of his beginnings in Queens, he did not intend to be poor all his life. On trips into Lebanon he made many contacts. He found opportunities to have cigarettes and "recreational products for officers" privately shipped into the country.

Most military officers are not lifers. In Lebanon, many were planning their civilian futures. Business opportunities were unfolding. Friends in Tom's case are usually for a lifetime.

In 1959, Tom had an opportunity to do an East Africa run on a freighter. Seeing Portugal's African empire would change his life. Unlike other empires in Africa, there was no color line in Portugal's colonies. Tom formed deep friendships with both Portuguese and Africans and returned to Africa dozens of times over the next 55 years.

Business in Africa entailed many products, including ivory when it was legal. Recreation included big game hunting. Business and recreation combined included hunting safaris for Americans in Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Botswana, Tom notes, is the best-run country in Africa.

In 1963, Tom married Sheila Hillman, a Weymouth native. For 52 years they have been equals in business and in life in the firm of Coughlin & Coughlin. At its height, Coughlin & Coughlin had stores in Annapolis, MD.; Mystic, CT; North Palm Beach, FL; and Plymouth and North Conway, NH. Locally, from 1971 to 2005, the firm's headquarters was at the former Barnes Mills on the Jones River in Kingston.

For sale were furniture; antiques; exquisite marine paintings by the late Louis Dodd (a dear friend of Tom's); marine items from the great age of the passenger ship. As that era was ending, Tom made a trip to Taiwan to the world's largest ship scrap yard. In one of his most lucrative investments, he became the owner of a huge quantity of desirable items in wood, brass, pewter, etc.

Coughlin & Coughlin (usually as husband and wife) made biennial buying trips to England, France and Portugal. Locally, Sheila was introduced to Anthony Athanas, owner of Anthony's Pier IV – for many years the largest grossing restaurant in the United States. This friendship led to Tom's bringing the Peter Stuyvesant, a coastal runner, to permanent mooring in the Fort Point Channel in 1968. Sheila soon opened the Peter Stuyvesant Shop, which she ran until the Blizzard of 1978 sank the Peter Stuyvesant. (The sinking, Tom says, was "totally unnecessary!") The Coughlins came to Duxbury in 1969. Their enterprise is here only excerpted – with no mention, for example, of Tom's extensive dealings in South America. Along the way they had three sons: Sean, Kerry and Ryan. All served in the Marine Corps; Sean and Ryan are graduates of the Naval Academy. There are now seven grandchildren.

Coughlin & Coughlin recently sold its last showroom in Marshfield. Tom continues to find, buy and sell; and Tom and Sheila continue to support the Merchant Marine Academy's "regimented band." Tom recently took a grandson on an African safari. It goes without saying that he is not "politically correct." But at this juncture of his life, sons, daughters-in-law and grandchildren are what matter most.

Photo courtesy Tom Coughlin